

Addiction Medicine

A Primer & Things to Know to Join the Field

What is an addiction medicine specialist physician?

An addiction medicine specialist physician is a physician trained and certified to provide comprehensive care for addiction and substance related disorders, including the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of such health conditions.

Types of patients requiring assistance from an addiction medicine specialist physician

The addiction medicine physician provides medical care within the bio-psycho-social framework for persons with addiction, for the individual with substance-related health conditions, for persons who manifest unhealthy substance use, and for family members whose health and functioning are affected by another's substance use or addiction.

Care Settings

He/she is specifically trained in a wide range of prevention, evaluation and treatment modalities addressing substance use and addiction in ambulatory care settings, acute care and long-term care facilities, psychiatric settings, and residential facilities. Addiction medicine specialists often offer treatment for patients with addiction or unhealthy substance use who have co-occurring general medical and psychiatric conditions.

They work in clinical medicine, public health, educational, and research settings to advance the prevention and treatment of addiction and substance-related health conditions and to improve the health and functioning of persons with unhealthy substance use or who are affected family members of unhealthy substance users.

How One Practices

The addiction medicine physician is a key member of the health care team and is trained to coordinate and provide consultation services for other physicians and to use community resources when appropriate. Some addiction medicine physicians limit their practice to patients with addiction or other patterns of unhealthy substance use. Others focus their practice on patients within their initial medical specialty who have substance-related health conditions.

Getting into the field - Residency First

While completing medical school, you'll select a residency program at an accredited teaching hospital. These programs vary in length from 3 to 7 years, depending on your specialty. If you'd like to subspecialize in addiction medicine, you can choose from any of the 24 primary specialty residencies, though the majority of addiction medicine fellows coming from Family Medicine or Internal Medicine residencies. After you complete your residency program, you are eligible to take your board certification exam and practice in your choice of settings.

Moving on to an Addiction Medicine Fellowship

Following your residency, you can pursue additional specialized training in addiction medicine by applying for a fellowship at one of the 86 Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME)-accredited programs. The fellowship is 1 year in length and will provide you with the necessary training to be eligible to take your subspecialty board certification exam. Learn more about fellowships in addiction medicine at acaam.org/fellowship-training.

Is there a need for addiction medicine specialist physicians?

Yes. As you likely have read, more than 100,000 American lives were lost to the overdose epidemic in 2021, and additional access to evidence-based care for those with substance use disorders is necessary. In fact, access to care in areas of the highest need provides a physician the opportunity to apply for a federal loan repayment program, easing the burden of medical debt on many providing this care.

Learn more from the American College of Academic Addiction Medicine: www.ACAAM.org.

